
After the Marketplace: Evidence, Social Science and Educational Research¹

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Abstract

This paper is an essay on the state of Australian education that frames new directions for educational research. It outlines three challenges faced by Australian educators: highly spatialised poverty with particularly strong mediating effects on primary school education; the need for intellectual and critical depth in pedagogy, with a focus in the upper primary and middle years; and the need to reinvent senior schooling to address emergent pathways from school to work and civic life. It offers a narrative description of the dynamics of policy making in Australia and North America and argues for an evidence-based approach to social and educational policy – but one quite unlike current test and market-based approaches. Instead, it argues for a multidisciplinary approach to a broad range of empirical and case-based evidence that subjects these to critical, hermeneutic social sciences. Such an approach would join educational policy with educational research, and broader social, community and governmental action with the aim of reorganising and redistributing material, cultural and social resources.

Introduction

This is a narrative analysis of Australian educational policy, with illustrations drawn from the context of Queensland state education. I begin from two key insights on educational policy since the 1980s philosophic work of Lyotard and Foucault: (1) that state policies and their critiques actually constitute a series of overlapping discourses and, moreover, (2) that policy interventions actually have strong narrative chains, ‘story grammars’ about specific domains of problems and their possible solutions, about material societal and institutional conditions, and about prospective social agents and scenarios of action (Luke 1997). At the same time, the format of this paper is itself a narrative, an attempt to capture one of the dilemmas facing Australian educational researchers and teachers: that of moving between and conjoining the discourses and life worlds of policy formation and educational research.

Movement between school and academy typically is framed in the shopworn metaphor of practice and theory that Britzman's (1991) *Practice Makes Practice* so eloquently critiqued. There are complementary moves in the analysis of state, power and bureaucracy: a shunting between research and policy formation, between critique and reconstruction, with all of the issues such moves beg about points of possible appropriation and innovation, collusion and collaboration, contradiction and historical movement. This threatens the comfort zones (increasingly uncomfortable, given the latest wave of marketisation of Australian universities) of academic career pathways: worlds of performance indicators where publication, tenure, grants and so forth become both means and ends. Moves into state power and policy formation make for destabilising and irritating, risky and unpredictable shifts between forms of life, between discourses, between paradigmatic and professional communities, and they involve consequential decisions about our own life and career pathways as academics and educational researchers.

Educational policy and policy analysis are bids to reconstruct institutional syntaxes: sequences of actions, interventions and reforms with normative yet concrete material consequences. This does not deny the salience of social facts and estimable outcomes, of concrete historical moments and material conditions. Quite the contrary, policy can narratively reconfigure the way that the state, educational institutions and human actors within those institutions deploy discourses, and material and human resources towards particular regulative ends. Educational outcomes, or more accurately educational consequences, have allied historical mediations within the social fields of economies, institutional cultures and, most importantly, the life pathways to, through and around these fields. My point here is that at this historical moment movements through and across the traditionally bifurcated social fields of academy and bureaucracy, research and policy can construct new narratives.

I develop three broad claims about the challenges facing Australian education. These will be presented both as empirical *and* narrative claims.² They focus on the early, middle and senior years of schooling:

- The principal problems facing educators and systems in the early years are the powerful effects of *poverty*, both in its most historically persistent forms and those emergent in communities experiencing the immediate impacts of structural economic, cultural and sociodemographic change in what we could term, for want of better words, the new Australia.
- As the consequential effects of poverty wash through schools and systems at all levels, the principal challenge in the middle years is that of *pedagogy*, the building of new forms of pedagogic practice and action that might begin to turn the educational performance of the significant percentage of youth who disaffiliate from formal education.

- The major issue facing the secondary school is that of *pathways*, where the state at large is struggling to articulate and enable new pathways from school to work and further education in the face of the very new economic conditions, forms of cultural identity, practice and affiliation noted above.

I will make the polemical claim that Australian schools serve the social and economic interests of slightly more than half of all Australian youth – despite over a decade of major and costly attempts at curriculum revision, market-based reform, managerialist approaches to school management, policy revision and so forth.

I should begin by acknowledging the many educators pushing reform across Australian education: teachers strongly focused on pedagogy in classrooms, but also those civil servants and bureaucrats working in what are, for many, difficult conditions (their work is invisible to outsiders to civil service culture, is largely disrespected by the teaching workforce and unions, and goes unremarked in educational research), and those politicians who are deeply committed to understanding these dilemmas, generating innovative responses to the problems and, in effect, reinventing Australian education. Yet my purpose here is not to defend or explicate ‘New Basics’, ‘Productive Pedagogies’, ‘Literate Futures’ or the numerous other future-oriented reforms that have been underway in Queensland and other states.

These reforms, for all their possibilities and problems, exemplify new opportunities and challenges for educational research. As much as we may complain about the new competitive tendering environment, levels of state investment in research in all its forms increased throughout the 1990s. From my time as a Dean and later as Deputy Director General of Education in Queensland, I would estimate that levels of state investment in educational research in the mid-1990s averaged around \$30 000 per annum. Those levels probably would push over a million dollars per annum per state at present, though contingent on budgetary conditions. But it is also a consequence of the same neoliberal reconstruction of educational bureaucracies. At once there is a new push for *evidence-based social policy*, an issue I will discuss at length. In response, bureaucracies are struggling to strike fine balances between the development of in-house research and analytic capacity, and the outsourcing of research and development work through consultancy and tendering. At the same time, cutbacks in the university sector and the support of pure research means that educational researchers worldwide are being pushed to undertake contract research to subsidise *any* faculty research capacity. This is a volatile and contradictory cocktail, full of possible conflicts of interest, compromise and appropriation. Taken as a state reorganisation of knowledge/power formation, it has stripped away resources for pure, foundational research and refocused them on the applied, the commodifiable and the profitable.³ At the same time, it has had the indirect effect, however intentional, of opening public policy formation to stronger social scientific influence than the historical patriarchy, exclusivity and

anti-scholasticism of civil service policy formation had previously enabled. It has created a situation where governments and systems, in many cases for the first time and with no small amount of trepidation, are reaching out to the educational research community for substantive analyses, for policy formation, for ideas about how to remake the connections between curriculum, communications media old and new, and everyday classroom practice.

How should we focus our efforts? These are as much epistemological and methodological issues as they are institutional and political. While our counterparts in the US and UK are engaged in an acrimonious debate over what might count as evidence-based educational policy, and neo-conservative groups are lobbying systematically against educational research and teacher education (Laitsch, Heilman and Shaker 2002), Australian states are searching out research that can form the basis for the next cycle of educational policy. In addition to a strong, renewed national focus on classroom practice, this includes:

- localised, regionalised intergovernmental service provision and educational intervention; and, relatedly,
- rearticulation of educational sectors that historically have fallen into different ministries, fiscal and policy structures (e.g. schooling, child care, technical and vocational education, welfare services, mental health and rehabilitation, community employment).

A policy focus on new economies and cultures also requires much more programmatic research agendas on:

multiliteracies, new technologies and education, as systems seek to understand digital education after the hardware and infrastructure investment; and

new life pathways to and through, in and out of educational institutions, work and civic life, including a long overdue reconceptualisation of ‘outcomes’ and ‘competences’ in adult and vocational education.

These areas of research *can and must* be linked to a critical project of educational reform, a project with a renewed commitment to redressive and redistributive social justice. But it will require some careful consideration of the continued power of many of our current epistemological and methodological positions, the very positions that we tend to reproduce through the curriculum of masters degrees, professional doctorates and research supervision.

At the same time, my purpose here is to ask how educational systems can respond to conditions ‘after the marketplace’. I believe that we can now assess the legacy of

the last decade of neoliberal and liberal reforms: that the sum total of reforms have left us, to mix metaphors, all dressed up with multiple outcomes, voluminous curriculum documents, a *de facto* national testing system, school-based management – but without a strong normative vision of what might count as a just and powerful educational system in new economic and social conditions, an increasingly complex, risky and unjust transnational context.

This will require paradigm shift. But which of our many longstanding assumptions about educational research and reform are sustainable? These include powerful presuppositions that have guided our efforts at education for social justice for two decades:

- That quantitative research necessarily travels with neoliberal reform and is antithetical to a project of social justice.
- That qualitative research is necessarily empowering, transformative and progressive, countering existing forms of technocratic hegemony and domination.
- That the current orientations to ‘outcomes’ and evidence are an intrinsically reactionary focus on performativity.
- That such work by definition is narrowly psychometric in disciplinary foundation and practical orientation.

In response, we need to ask epistemic questions about what will count as ‘evidence’, what will count as the ‘truths’ that we speak to and through institutional power, and about the domains of knowledge, discourse and discipline that might enable us to mobilise educational institutions, and their complex flows of capital, bodies and discourse to begin altering visibly inequitable and unjust educational outcomes, consequences and pathways. These have been the very questions raised by the now old ‘new’ sociology of education for over three decades. They need to be asked again, and asked as much about our own work as researchers as about the state and its policies.

What follows proceeds in three moves: a brief review of the current US debate on evidence-based policy; a narrative, quasi-ethnographic description of the use of evidence in policy formation; and a framing of the aforementioned three key claims about the state of Australian education. Along the way, I set out to model what a more complex social science as applied to policy formation might look like, to explore the use of Bourdieuan theory as one model of policy analysis, and to use it to argue for different directions in policy and research.

On evidence-based social policy

Several weeks ago I was at Teachers College in New York discussing governmental policy responses to the complex push–pull effects of economic and cultural globalisation. Such discussions are always interesting, for they are lived moments in the curious phenomenology of globalisation, where particular analytic takes and lived experiences of the transnational are contingent on local ‘optics’ and available discourses (Burbules and Torres 2000). Attempts at universalising and totalising models of globalisation that ‘travel well’ often wind up unintentionally illustrating their own embeddedness in national or regional parochialism. This applies even to ostensibly ‘critical’ analyses of globalisation: Ritzer’s (2001) MacDonaldisation thesis is a case in point.

The lecture was in the Chapel, next to the E. L. Thorndike building. It covered aspects of the Queensland ‘New Basics’ and the Singaporean ‘Learning Nation, Thinking Schools’ policies as responses to the pressures of the transnational. Afterwards, one American colleague commented that New Basics had ‘taken Dewey’s side’. This comment was both troubling and revealing. Sixty years after John Dewey and E. L. Thorndike have left the building, the binary divide in epistemology, methodology and educational policy debates remains. Their ghosts are sustained by a persistent strain of dialectics: quantitative versus qualitative, child-centered versus behaviourist, progressivist/constructivist versus direct instruction, implicit versus explicit pedagogy, project-based work versus skills orientations – and, at different historical junctures, left versus right, liberal versus neoliberal, critical/emancipatory versus reproductionist.

In *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Matters*, William James (1899/2001) – a mentor to both Dewey and Thorndike – defined pedagogy as the ‘art and science’ of teaching. It is this binary divide that became the hallmark of educational research at its very foundation a century ago. On one side we find the emergent twentieth century science of behaviourism, its strong focus on psychometrics, quasi-medical experimental models, and the application of these to agricultural models of treatment, the development curricular commodities and factory models of school and systems administration. This was the historical push to automate these processes of teaching and learning in the interests of the production of skilled human capital, the Fordist educational project that drives education in so many states today. In opposition is the version of progressivism that emphasises holism of human capability, humanist curriculum, and symbolic interactionist models of teaching and learning yoked to the production of a democratic citizen. Their ostensive differences to the side, both models are predicated on a distinctively American pragmatist philosophy where technology, capital and an ethics of progress are realised via individuation and individualism. Let us take them as two responses to the dilemma that Dewey, Thorndike and colleagues faced: the development of a mass state system

of education in response to industrial modernity, new forms of production, urbanisation, new youth identities and social formations. These were intellectual puzzles, research and policy anomalies no less daunting than those that we face today.

In 2001, the Bush administration's educational policies pushed to one side of the binary divide. The *Education Act* of 2001, commonly known as 'No Child Left Behind', set the conditions whereby government funding was tied to the adoption of reading programs 'scientifically proven to generate improved standardized test scores' (US Department of Education 2001). The move was strongly supported by number of conservative think tanks led by Reid Lyon, Diane Ravitch and others. These include the Council for Excellence in Education and the Coalition for Evidence in Education (Laitsch, Heilman and Shaker 2002). In a press release to praise these groups, Rod Paige, Secretary of Education, argued that '30 years of NAEP [National Assessment of Educational Progress] had yielded 'no progress' (US Department of Education 2001). Instead, the current policies were based on the assumption that only truly 'scientific' research would guide policy, that 'randomized controlled trials' set a 'gold standard' that had led to 'reduced unemployment, poverty, disease' and a 'decrease in coronary heart disease and stroke by over 50%'. Recent work on the interpretation of hormone replacement therapy results were cited by the Department of Education as examples of the negative effects of 'non-randomized' research.

In my own field of language and literacy education, the controversy has led to heated debate over the National Reading Panel, which argued for the efficacy of phonics instruction on the bases of a meta-analysis of 'randomised' and 'experimental' research. Critique has come from many quarters, ranging from progressivist critique, to minority educators skeptical about the differential effects of these on minority communities, to documentation the meta-analysis misinterpreted levels of significance (e.g. Garan 2001, Allington 2002).

This general approach to policy advocates a narrow version of educational 'science' that, however intentionally, abets a marketisation of educational knowledge and a political economy of textbook production, consultant training and in-service. Let me illustrate the effects by citing the case of one Oregon elementary school with whose principal I recently spoke (M. Shiroishi, personal communication, 11 November 2002). That school has a lower socioeconomic student body (73% free and reduced lunch), 45 per cent Hispanic, 5 per cent Asian-American, 43 per cent white. Its targeted Reading First federal funding of \$300 000 to improve these 'at risk' children's reading performance is contingent upon the adoption and 'faithful implementation' of a 'comprehensive reading program' to be chosen from SRA/Open Court, Houghton, Harcourt, Macmillan, Reading Mastery, Rigby, Scott Foresman, Wright Group or

Success for All, she explained, 'scientifically based' and therefore approved by the Oregon state department. The funds must be spent by bringing in trainers/consultants from designed multinational publishers and their local university affiliates. The target is that within two years standardised test scores will improve or the school itself will be sanctioned. Furthermore, many states have begun moving towards voucher schemes for communities such as these.

This is a consolidation of the technocratic political economy of education that Michael Apple (1981) described over two decades ago. While it is built as an ostensible response to the effects of poverty, and cultural and linguistic diversity, it chains together a new positivist educational science and a web of federally-funded industrial partnerships between university-based researchers, multinational textbook publishers, and local consultants/trainers. With more and more university researchers moving into commercial activities, many of us took part in a recent internal debate among the editorial board of *Reading Research Quarterly* about the ethics of publishing research undertaken by researchers with commercial interests in the products up for 'scientific' verification. In effect, these federal policies have created an environment where educational research risks becoming a kind of in-house product development and market research activity, with spin off consultancy and textbook endorsement fees.

But before one rushes headlong into the assumption that medical models of research are generalisable to education, we need to consider their complex strategies and political economies. First, it is worth noting that agencies like the Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organisation do not rely exclusively on randomised experimental models. Modern epidemiology and medicine uses a broad range of methodologies, from case-based work, observational ethnographies and interviews to complex social statistical analyses. Further, in the case of the tobacco and pharmaceutical industries, university researchers sponsored by commercial funds, government statutory and regulatory bodies, and of course, corporate sponsors and private developers have, at the least, a mixed track record. The Australian government recently moved to regulate the pharmaceutical industry's subsidisation of travel, vacations and other 'training' seminars for doctors and researchers. At the same time, state governments and universities actively seek the same industry's partnership in the development and commercialisation of biotechnology research.

There are additional spill-over effects into other educational areas, specifically teacher education. In California, for example, the state Department of Education has insistently vetted syllabus documents from language arts, reading and literacy methodology courses to determine if they are in compliance with the state reading strategies deemed by No Child Left Behind (Laitsch et al 2002).

What has come to count as evidence-based educational policy in the US has set new benchmarks for a tight articulation of publishers, state authorities and a particular definition of ‘science’. This is nothing short of a legislative codification of new definitions and interventions for what counts as success and risk. Because it is targeted at poor readers, it has had less visible impact on schools in upper socioeconomic areas, other than anecdotal evidence that the current policy push towards ‘standards’ is leading to an overall narrowing of the curriculum across several states.

Does evidence count in policy formation?

Critique is, of course, the easy bit. And this is not to diminish the problems with the intersections of poverty and social marginalisation, multilingualism and cultural diversity that the American state system is facing. Since Coleman’s time they have been part of the complex factors that mediate equality of educational opportunity and achievement. These require vigorous policy intervention, not free market ideology. But what does this say about the viability of evidence-based policy and accountability-oriented policy? Are these irrevocably ideologically contaminated? Are they necessarily extensions of what is, at best, narrow positivism and reductionist approaches to educational assessment (Shepherd 2000) or, at worst, what Gould (1981) demonstrated was a racist and patriarchal history of pseudo-science. Is the problem that US and UK policy makers ‘took Thorndike’s side’, mandating a limiting concept of what might count as educational science? Is it possible to enlist evidence-based policy formation as part of a critical educational project?

Let me shift the narrative. In an excellent review of developments in educational ethnography, Foley, Levinson and Hurtig (2001) document the coming apart of many of the fundamental assumptions in the field. The axiom in the Meadian postwar tradition was that ethnography entailed an objectivised, rationalised subjectivity on the part of the researcher, whereby outsiders would make the familiar strange, even as they entered the field as ‘participant observers’. By this account, the maintenance of a scientific distance was seen as a core component of the ethnographer’s work.

Foley and colleagues go on to contrast this with the neo-essentialist claims of feminist theorists, post-colonialists, indigenous peoples and ‘radical multiculturalists’: that only insiders can know cultures and have the right to speak about or on behalf of those cultures. This is a strong claim about the intrinsic validity of insiders’ speaking rights and a skepticism towards the very western science that purported to be outside of what ultimately became genocidal and patriarchal bias. Indeed, the history of colonisation and patriarchy is one where women, diasporic and indigenous communities have been taken as artifact, objects of a scientific gaze to be

manipulated, measured and tested. However ‘scientific’ these activities might have purported to be, they were indeed situated sociocultural and political practices.

Using the example of the work of D.K. Kondo (1990), Foley and colleagues go on to talk of the possibilities of what they call ‘halfie’ ethnographies. Working from feminist and materialist theories, Kondo undertook an ethnography of Japanese working women. Written as a Sansei woman, her story as much about her own hybridity, multiple subjectivity and travel between and across contexts as it is about a scientific object of study. One lesson from this work, and the broader corpus of cultural studies, is, of course, a critique of the concept of culture as singular, homogeneous and boundaried. The spatial metaphor of boundaried and autonomous culture was necessary to make traditional subject–object, researcher–researched, insider–outsider binaries work. The point I want to return to here concerns the movement between ‘cultures’ of research and policy, university and state bureaucracy. What follows is a narrative of ‘in-between’-ness, a ‘halfie’ ethnography.

Ben Levin (Deputy Minister of Education, Manitoba), Charles Ungerleiter (previously Deputy Minister of Education, British Columbia), Roger Slee (Deputy Director General of Education, Queensland) and myself are ‘tweener’. We are educational researchers who moved into substantive positions within bureaucracies and, in several of our cases, back out again. This is perhaps a different situation than that of Garth Boomer and others who moved from broad experiences within educational systems towards academic work and writing.

As I began my brief tenure as Deputy Director General of Education in Queensland in 1999, I was still attending evening seminars and undertaking readings about how the state and policy discourse worked. Our studies included Rose’s *Powers of Freedom* (1999), which draws from Foucault and the genealogical studies of mathematics and statistics by Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking. Rose documents the emergence of a modernist state that is premised on the calculability of the human subject, where ‘countability’ prefigures neoliberal moves towards government based on institutional performance and measurement. I also was reading recent work by Habermas (1998) which argues that legal, juridical discourse is a bridge between ‘facts and norms’.

Though drawn from two competing strands of contemporary western philosophy, these works offer complementary accounts of how evidence-based social policy might work. In Rose’s historical analysis, an avalanche of numbers overrides and drives the discourses of ethical decision making, taking on a life of its own in the constitution of governmentality. In Habermas’ view, it is only a dialogic, hermeneutic social science that stands to mediate between facticity, in all of its various claims, and

social norms. This is the formation of law, achieved through the ethical conditions and very possibility for discourse and consensus. While they offer strikingly different critiques of the state, both accounts view policy, law and social regulation as shaped and achieved through constituent discourses towards ethical and moral ends.

Moving from these discussions into the corporate boardroom of senior government bureaucracy was an out-of-body experience. What follows is a narrative composite of some of my first ‘high stakes’ senior policy meetings. The topic on the table was school size. Relatedly, we were discussing new school initiatives and the always politically sensitive issue of school closures. I waited for Rose’s avalanche of numbers. I waited for technocratic economic rationalism. I waited for the ideal speech situation (not really). None arrived. After the fact, I made a list of the speech acts, treating them as a Habermasian taxonomy of dialogic ‘truth claims’. These grounds were:

- Precedent: ‘We always have done it this way.’
- Political: ‘The unions would never let us do it.’ That constituency would never wear it.’ ‘We’d never get that through treasury.’
- Fiscal: ‘We can’t afford it.’ ‘Where is the money coming from?’
- Evidence: ‘Look at the data.’ ‘Look at the test scores.’
- Philosophy: ‘We believe in...’

The exchanges shifted fluidly, sometimes wildly, between the different categories, and, as is typical in face-to-face informal conversation, there was little explicit, self-conscious marking of such shifts. Curiously, the latter two categories were invoked least frequently, a pattern which developed across many such meetings.

We could undertake critical discourse analyses of policy claims, breaking them down as Aristotelian forms of knowledge, seeing them as taxonomic shifts in logical grounds, or, as Habermas might, taking them as speech acts with particular locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary characteristics. But I experienced them as something more akin to the ebbs and flows of what Blackmore and Sachs (1998) have referred to as the ‘emotional economy’ of educational administration. To a newcomer, they were more like unpredictable musical riffs, presented with affective force, their effects greatly dependent on the gendered power, position and authority of speakers. I find it curious that we generally treat classroom interaction and school leadership in such terms but fail to apply such analytic constructs to policy analysis – treating policy as a relatively simple instance of dominant ideology, as static text, rather than something which is historically produced through discourse generative zones, their everyday exchanges of capital, and face-to-face dynamics.

My point is that policy formation entails far more arbitrary play of discourse and truth, power and knowledge than I had anticipated, notwithstanding how it is justified in press releases, *Hansard*, or green papers, or how it is critiqued. The use of evidence – whether psychometric, sociometric, factor-analytic, multilevel, case-based, ethnographic, or qualitative – appeared far less systematic, far less ‘calculating’ than Rose’s account, and far less indicative of a dominant or even coherent ideology than I had anticipated. My experience convinced me that we could only move systematically towards the redressive educational project if, indeed, we reworked and reappropriated an evidence-based approach to policy development. Without a broad array of evidence and data – developing specific redressive strategies was difficult, arbitrary and piecemeal, more likely to entail add-on programs and token distribution of funds. But the evidence-based educational policy required is something of a very different order than No Child Left Behind.

Enlisting critical social science in policy development

In *Academic Distinctions*, James Ladwig (1996) argues for a critical realist approach to educational research that engages qualitative and quantitative, hermeneutic and positivist paradigms in a constructive dialogue about the reform of educational systems and their social consequences. Working from a different history and context, I want to take his argument a step further. We need evidence-based social policies derived, *inter alia*, from a critical, hermeneutic social science that draws from a range of disciplinary discourses and fields. Such an approach would provide a more complex, theory-driven analysis, using and triangulating a range of social statistical, demographic, economic, sociological, ethnographic as well as psychometric data sources.

It would move away from a reductionist focus on outcomes towards a broader analysis of how educationally acquired capital has material consequences in individuals’ and communities pathways through and via emergent economies and institutions. It would bring to bear the kinds of multilevel statistical analysis (e.g. hierarchical modelling, cluster analysis) that have come into their own in the past decade, enabling the modeling of mediating social and educational effects, in lieu of reductionist, causal models of psychological effects. We would use ethnographic, case study and discourse analytic work to test hypotheses, to build models, and to instantiate the trends and clusters that emerge from such an analysis.

Further, such work would provide the grounds for a pedagogy about policy, giving policy makers such as those I described above meta-theoretical and taxonomic categories for marking out and comparing the various truth claims upon which decisions about flows of power are made. Using the partial Queensland data that we have, let me try to illustrate what such a view might tell us.

In most Australian states, the major policy settings for ‘reform’ have been in place for some years now. These consist of: (1) standardised achievement testing in literacy and numeracy; (2) the updating and implementation of curriculum documents. Under these broad auspices, ‘outcomes-based education’ brings together Tylerian models of curriculum with the aforementioned neoliberal policy approaches to the appraisal of student performance. At the same time, the de facto national agenda has been to move towards (3) school-based management, where principals can make semi-autonomous decisions about school programming, structures and procedures, ostensibly to ensure the improvement of (1) above and the better implementation of (2) above. The effects of this approach are compounded and, perhaps, confounded by the emergence of powerful market forces, with the Catholic and independent sectors differentially funded but less explicitly regulated in terms of testing-based performativity and curriculum compliance above. Though on different timelines in various states, this general suite of reforms has evolved for a decade.

Let me return to the three propositions about the state of Australian education. Each has policy implications, each is predicated on a mixed evidence base, and each stakes out significant directions for the educational research community.

On poverty in early childhood

My first claim is that there is no generalisable basic skills crisis in early childhood. Rather the material conditions, social relations, discourse relations, textual and social practices of ‘childhood’ and family are in historical transition. These changes are strongly mediated by both residual and emergent forms of poverty, both those persistent forms of class and cultural inequality that have plagued us since Karmel’s time among indigenous, migrant and working-class communities, and those that are arising in the new Australian economy.

By recent estimates, 20 per cent of Queensland children are from families living at or below the nominal Henderson poverty line (Education Queensland 1999). This tends to be increasingly ‘spatialised poverty’ (cf. Harvey 2000), concentrated in new migrant communities, indigenous communities, and in emergent edge-cities, the cheap mortgage belts surrounding capital and provincial cities. As early as the preliminary studies for *Education 2010*, it was clear to us that specific zones of spatialised poverty required urgent concentrated, cross-governmental action and, moreover, much stronger coordination of community-based capital, rebuilding of social infrastructure and enlistment of private sector resources.

At the same time, the new suburban poor have high degrees of mobility and transience, with families shifting residence in search of work. One edge-city, predominantly white-Australian school that we visited in our consultations on ‘Literate

Futures' had successfully put in an early intervention reading/literacy program, only to have a 60 per cent turnover between years 3 and 6. This hindered sustainable effects of any 'single-shot' grade-level intervention.

In this demographic reality, there is some good news. On the basis of the face-to-face individual diagnostics undertaken by year 2 teachers, 72 per cent of this same student cohort was experiencing some difficulty with early reading and language (Education Queensland, 2002). Nonetheless, by later in year 3, 90 per cent of these same children have achieved the state 'benchmark' for functional decoding in the year 3 testing system (MCEETYA 2001). Both of these instruments have their limitations. The former has reasonable levels of contextual and content validity, but overall validity is only as good as that which can be achieved through loose systems of teacher moderation. The latter is based on an arbitrary 'cut point' for establishing the benchmark. Nonetheless, if we disaggregate the data by location, we find that that the concentration of reading failure is in those specific zones noted above. There is a powerful connection between early achievement differentials and spatialised poverty.

As part of a richer analysis, this would suggest that a simple testing/phonics agenda might push some specific test score achievements up, as it has in some states, but is at best only a partial strategy. Certainly this has been the experience in Tasmania and other states. At worst, it may be a misgauged response in a system where teachers are actually moving 90 per cent of the student population to what are nominally basic reading levels in the first three years of instruction. Basic skills levels and instructional efficacy – as much as it might appeal to 'back to the basics' advocates – may not be the problem or the solution to sustainable gains for the lower quartile of the student cohort.

We could triangulate the above data with the largest scale discourse analytic study of early home–school transitions for lower socioeconomic and ethnic minority children in Queensland. Freebody, Ludwig and Gunn (1996) looked at home literacy events and 200 classroom events over an extended period. They found that the problem was more complex than the typical attribution of basic skills problems to 'deficit parenting'. Their finding confirmed aspects of the now classical match–mismatch hypothesis that successful students who come from English-as-a-first language, school-like interactional environments are better primed to succeed in school-based interaction. But they also offer an unsettling finding: that early school instruction tended to be intellectually trivial and cognitively low level, more focused on classroom management, on teaching kids procedural routines for doing lesson work and school, including worksheets, than on depth knowledge and skill development. That is, their point is that the curricular and interactional norms of schools where benchmarks of 'success' were being defined and assessed were of dubious educational value.

Moving from quantitative to qualitative, blending teacher judgement data (the Year 2 Net), psychometric data (benchmark testing) and discourse analytic work, we can set the grounds for a very different analysis and potentially more powerful policy approach than blanket test-driven endorsements of standardised programs. First, it suggests the need for a community-targeted, whole-of-government strategy for intervening in spatialised poverty – one that would attempt to coordinate a range of available capital in communities (Luke 2003). Second, it suggests that effective pedagogic reform may not centrally reside in the need for packaged, standardised commodities for the teaching of basic skills. Indeed, such an approach might effectively misdirect scarce funding and resources. This is especially the case if the pedagogical problem of intellectual demand and cognitive depth is in fact exacerbated by a basic skills orientation.

On pedagogy in the middle years

There are other key findings in the 2001 round of benchmark testing in literacy. First, there is evidence that the year 5 performance is lower in absolute terms than current year 3 performance: specifically, the overall proportion of students meeting the nominal benchmark performance in year 3 is 80 per cent (MCEETYA 2001). Although we have no longitudinal cohort data (which makes ‘value adding’ studies more difficult and problematic), we could hypothesise that this is an instance of a trend in US reading surveys, the ‘fifth grade slump’ (Calfee 2003). That is, early gains in reading and literacy established through intervention tend to residualise as we move towards the middle years of schooling.

There are a range of possible explanations for ‘slump’ data. The Freebody et al (1996) study was broadly corroborated by the Queensland School Longitudinal Restructuring Study (Lingard et al 2002). That study was the largest observational study of classroom practice in Australian educational history, with the coding of 1000 classrooms. Among other findings, it found that levels of ‘productive pedagogies’ were low, with a slump in intellectual demand in the middle years. Lingard et al argue that this is a major impediment to educational achievement and outcomes, particularly among the lower achieving students. Both studies, then, suggest a very different policy challenge than the remediation of basic skills via the standardisation of teacher behaviour (Luke, *in press*). The policy challenge by these accounts is to develop forms of pedagogy that mobilise depth forms of knowledge and intellectual field, more complex technical skills, and substantive critical discourses as a means towards sustaining more powerful student pathways and achievements.

A recent national study of literacy and numeracy in the middle years of schooling (Luke et al 2003) found that systematic data on the middle years of schooling was not

available. The case studies and those data that did exist, however, indicted that there are unresolved issues in pedagogical depth and quality. This appears to form a major impediment to the translation of many of the significant gains of the middle years reforms (e.g. better social and psychological ethics of care, higher retention and student motivation, more relevant curriculum) into improved achievement and engaged life pathways, especially amongst the lower performing groups and cohorts. Yet even if we succeed modestly at changing the subject of pedagogy in the middle years, serious questions have been raised about the continued relevance and consequences of senior schooling for many students.

On pathways from school to the new economy

In the last five years, all Australian states have conducted various studies on pathways from school into further education and work. Since the late 1990s, the average Queensland year 12 cohort has numbered around 30 000 students per year. The overall percentage of Queenslanders who complete 12 years of schooling is 67 per cent, with an apparent retention of about 74 per cent from years 8–12 (Education Queensland 2002). The retention rates have been in decline nationally. In Queensland, the proportion of students who have achieved a ‘sound’ mark or better in three senior subjects is about two thirds; about 14 per cent do not complete any science, mathematics or technology board subjects. Typically about a third of the graduating cohort enrol in basic communications classes. About 30 per cent of the overall cohort complete VET certificate at AQF Level 1 or higher (Educational Queensland 2002).

By the commencement of the senior years, a quarter of the potential school completion cohort has left the school, and governments have very limited tracking data on the life pathways of these students. Many ‘disappear from the screen’ of social analysis, turning up variously in data sets maintained by health, police services, unemployment and social welfare agencies. However governments have very little rigorous empirical data on how youth get from institution to institution or how and when they depart from these systems altogether.

Of those students the above data suggests that between a fifth and a third are struggling to reach levels of achievement that would secure ready pathways to further education or employment. In the case of Queensland, this situation has led to two major reports by Pitman (2003) and Gardner (2002) and a series of proposed training reforms that extend the mandatory age of schooling, a move also announced in South Australia. The Pitman study calls for a fundamental rethinking of the senior school. The senior system remains strongly geared to binary tracks that lead to traditional university entry, on the one hand, and vocational education, on the others. Yet we could ask whether this system has become dysfunctional, with almost half of the overall cohort either leaving or underprovided for.

The system maintains a ‘dual pathway’ route from school to work that was designed for a more stable employment market, with traditional bifurcated pathways through high stakes assessment systems to university studies and to vocational training. At the same time there is evidence of a delinearisation of school–further education–work pathways – with up to half of entering cohorts of many universities comprised of non-school leavers, a considerable number of university graduates engaging in vocational training, and increasing retraining requirements of many retrenched workers. In that delinearisation, somewhere between a quarter and half of the cohort is ‘lost’, with systems lacking a definitive sense of how, where and to what ends. This is not exclusively an Australian phenomenon, but reflects broader trends amongst the workforces of OECD countries.

In sum: the narrative that I have developed here is partial, raising many areas for further research and development. It suggests that schooling is struggling to come to grips with the new Australia, with its culturally and linguistically diverse population, its volatile economy characterised by new and spatialised stratifications of wealth, and new pathways from school to work, community and civic life. This is a troubling and complex picture. But I believe that it belies rather than reinforces the capacity of the species of quick fixes offered by the testing, basic-skills accountability models advocated in the approaches to evidence-based policy critiqued here. Just as medical models are limited in their power to analyse and proscribe complex social, cultural and economic problems, hypodermic models of educational treatment ultimately have limited medium to long-term efficacy.

To find productive policy alternatives requires that we anticipate the limits of particular interventions (e.g. early intervention models, phonics programs) where they are not articulated with a broader suite of systemic approaches to social policy. A critical educational project will only work if it sits within a broader social policy that brings together government and community-based resources systematically to address issues of changing demographic patterns and available community capital, social, economic, ecological as well as cultural. It would move us towards professional interventions with a sustainable focus on pedagogy and curriculum, not management and accountability. It would demand reinvention of relations *between* educational institutions, from child care to schools to vocational education. And it will require a sociological imagination capable of envisioning, designing and realising new student pathways that articulate through and around these institutions and those of new economies, with the state and private sectors providing access to enabling, combinatory forms of capital.

As a research community, we need to move towards a richer, more multidisciplinary approach to educational analysis and policy development – beyond the crude league

tables and single-dimension test score analysis, and beyond critique that explicates the ideological contradictions of these policies but struggles to remake schools and systems in communities' and students' interests.

A research agenda

We talk about multiple subjectivities and new identities, about globalisation, and about the critical. These come to material ground in educational systems like ours. They are no longer abstractions or artifacts of educational theory, if they ever were. Our educational systems have struggled for over a decade to define coherent policy directions other than neoliberal marketisation, proliferation of outcomes and tests, and piecemeal responses to cultural, linguistic and epistemological diversity that have created a welter of 'add on' and 'pull out' programs. In policy making venues such as those that I have described here, the *social scientific evidence* of changed contexts and conditions facing communities and schools, state systems and bureaucracies needs to be placed on the table. And it is in the context of this evidence – about poverty, about new demographies and cultures, about available capital in social fields, about life pathways, about fair and unfair patterns of access and employment, about changing economies and institutions – that educational reform needs to be made and assessed.

We talk about our commitments to inclusion, to bringing forms of alterity, voice and identity into pedagogic and institutional fields. But strategies of educational inclusion must aim towards changed material conditions. Looking back at the postwar period, A. H. Halsey (1986, p. 173) commented that: 'Exhortation alone is futile, whether to altruism or to tolerance or to the recognition of the equal claim of others to share in the bounty afforded by society.' The challenge is to rebuild institutions in ways that enable changed material and social relations.

There are serious questions about current policy settings. There also must be questions about the power and value of many current research directions. I have argued here that to move forward we must look through social theoretic lenses at evidence – materialist and discourse-based evidence, quantitative and case-based, psychometric and sociometric, using multilevel models that stress mediation and contextualisation, rather than 'causal factors' – all with an eye to developing new narratives, new pathways and new policies.

We are at a difficult but defining historical moment. The events post 9/11 have had the effect of destabilising and questioning the human capital model, with issues of citizenship, ethics, human rights and identity suddenly focal to many nations. They have also underlined the potential obsolescence of our current systems and

approaches. Our generational tools have been those of critique. What a powerful evidence-based educational policy needs is a rich, critical, multidisciplinary social science, rather than a reductionist and ultimately ideological, psychological reductionism. Social science needs to move beyond an analysis of the capital effects of the school to engage with the durability, redeployment and combinatory powers of different forms of educationally acquired capital in communities – global and local, virtual and real. Of governments and policy makers, we need to demand an educational policy that can be read and constructed as but one component of broader social policy and cultural strategy.

For such a task neither Dewey nor Thorndike, neither unreconstructed progressivism or born again positivism will suffice. A critical educational project for remaking Australian education can afford neither a purity of research uncontaminated by normative responsibility for what is to be done nor naive policy, based on pseudoscience and anecdote. Nor can we operate solely as insiders or outsiders in the worlds of research and policy formation. We have our work cut out for us.

Notes

¹ A version of this paper was presented as The 2002 Radford Lecture, delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Australian Association for Research in Education in Brisbane. Aspects of the spoken address have been retained in this version prepared for publication.

² Following Lyotard (1982), my assumption here is that narrative and exposition, scenario and ‘science’ are co-articulations of power and discourse.

³ The ‘good old days’ of postwar academic freedom are part professional mythology and nostalgia, and part necessary defence of a powerful vision of the university that many fought for and lost their jobs for in and around 1968, a matter that has arisen again with instances of suppression of anti-administration critique in the US post-9/11. There never was a twentieth century university uncontaminated by corporate influence, as any of our senior colleagues who lived through McCarthyism, through the enlistment and funding of universities in the work of the military-industrial complex will tell us. Long before this, Stanford and Carnegie Melon were founded from the surplus labour of migrant workers translated into corporate philanthropy. At the same time, those gains in reinventing the university post-1968 as a site for social and cultural critique remain part of the aspirations of universities worldwide, even as they enter the life worlds of performance indicators, intellectual properties and biotech.

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